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SUBJECT: RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN THE NORTH PART I: POLOFF
VISITS LAO CAI PROVINCE, MEETS WITH PROTESTANTS

REF: A) HANOI 894 B) HANOI 549

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Summary and Comment

1. (SBU) At the recommendation of Protestants in Hanoi, an Embassy team visited Lao Cai Province in the third week of April to investigate allegations of district-level abuse against Protestant groups. The team was able to discuss with officials several serious allegations made against Lao Cai provincial and district authorities, and the access to a small sample of local Protestants and the frank and open discussion with officials at all levels about the gap between the new framework on religion and its implementation were a significant improvement over previous outreach trips. The team was also able to learn more about the development of Protestantism in the north. Based on the team's discussions, it appears that the GVN has given strict instructions to northern provinces to change their approach to our concerns on religious freedom. While the situation for Protestants there has not yet markedly improved, it may now be possible for house church congregations to register their activities per the law and per Lao Cai's purported plans. We plan to send another team to the region as early as June to follow up on these developments. End Summary and Comment.

2. (SBU) Per Ref A, Evangelical Church of Vietnam (ECVN) General Secretary Au Quanh Vinh recently arranged for eight H'mong house church deacons to meet in Hanoi with Embassy Poloff to discuss the situation for Protestants in the provinces in northern Vietnam with large ethnic minority populations following the promulgation of the GVN's new framework on religion last year. Vinh and the deacons reported that the mountainous border provinces of Lao Cai and Ha Giang are the most problematic for ethnic minority Protestants. Immediately following this discussion, we formally requested an extensive visit for Poloff and Pol Assistant to Lao Cai and Ha Giang from April 23-28 to investigate these reports and to press provincial, district and commune officials to change their approach to Protestants. Despite the political sensitivity of our proposed timing, which was concurrent with the Communist Party's 10th Congress, the GVN's Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) and the Provincial People's Committees (PPCs) in both provinces agreed to facilitate the trip. The Lao Cai PPC's official response stated "this is not a convenient time, but it would be impolite if we do not accept your visit."

3. (SBU) The team traveled to Lao Cai City by overnight

train and then drove east by off-road vehicles from Lao Cai's extreme western boundary with Lai Chau Province, district by district along Vietnam's border with China. In addition to meetings with provincial officials, the team met with Bat Xat and Bao Thang district and commune officials in Lao Cai (Ha Giang meetings reported septel). Officials from the PPC also facilitated unprecedented visits to ethnic H'mong villages with Protestant residents in each district, including Sang Ma Sao village in Bat Xat and Thuy Dien Village in Bao Thang. Both of these village visits were requested by the team in advance on the recommendation of Pastor Vinh. (Note: Bao Thang District in Lao Cai was incorrectly identified as "Bao Thuc" district by the ECVN as reported Para 11 in Ref A. End Note.)

Lao Cai Province

14. (SBU) On April 24, PPC Vice Chairman Pham Van Cuong gave Poloff a brief overview of the province's social development. Some 95 percent of Lao Cai's school age children attend classes, with more than 50 percent of school facilities "in good condition." There are special ethnic minority boarding schools in each district. Children below six years of age receive free medical care and 95 percent have been given free vaccinations. The province is trying to preserve ethnic minority cultural traditions by building culture houses and cultural "post-offices" in every commune and village. The province provides radio and TV programs in five ethnic languages: H'Mong, Dzao, Day, Tay and Thai, in addition to everyday Kinh language (ethnic Vietnamese) broadcasting, he added.

15. (SBU) Cuong asserted that in the last two years the PPC has made a special effort to speed up social and economic development in ethnic minority communities, particularly in the areas of infrastructure, improved cultivation and access

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to clean water. The province has spent "tens of billions of VND" each year on rural development under the GVN's 135 (poverty reduction) and 186 (infrastructure) programs. The province has also undertaken pilot projects to develop "trading villages" in three districts (including the village of Ta Phin - Para 13 in Ref B) to promote traditional trades as a source of income from increased tourism to the province. The local administration has set aside specialized agricultural areas in each district to promote the cultivation of maize, tea and beans. More than 43 percent of Lao Cai's population lives under the poverty line according to the GVN's 2005 guidelines. The GDP per capita is estimated at 12 percent of the national average; 14 to 15 percent in urban areas and seven to eight percent in rural districts, he said.

16. (SBU) Turning to religion, Cuong noted that there are some 4,000 practicing Buddhists in the province, mainly living in and around Lao Cai City. Representatives of Vietnam's official Buddhist church, the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS), frequently travel to Lao Cai to participate in seminars and festivals in the province. There are also 5,700 Catholics scattered across Lao Cai's ten districts. The province is divided into two main parishes, with eight total sub-parishes. Until recently, Catholic believers were served by only one priest and fifty church laymen, but Cuong confirmed that on April 13, a recently ordained deacon of Hung Hoa Diocese took up the Sapa District benefice as priest for Sapa's three sub-parishes (Ref B, Para 12).

17. (SBU) Cuong estimated that there are at least 9,000 Protestants in Lao Cai, but that the PPC's statistics are incomplete because "a number of denominations are conducting missionary activities without our knowledge." That said, the majority of Protestants in Lao Cai are affiliated with the ECVN or the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV). (Note: According to the ECVN, Lao Cai has a total of 122

house churches comprising 2,108 families, or 10,808 total Protestants. End Note.) The PPC has been in contact with the leaders of all Protestant organizations in the province and regularly listens to the concerns of the common people on religion. The PPC is thus well aware of emerging social problems caused by the growth in religious belief, and the administration is making certain that religious groups improve their services to believers to ensure that they contribute positively to society as a whole. "We think we've been doing a good job and we are confident the common people are happy with the current situation," he said.

18. (SBU) Cuong stated that Protestants are currently free to practice their faiths in a normal manner at home, but are not allowed to conduct religious services in outside places of worship. However, the PPC is currently considering applications from some ECVN congregations to legally register such places of worship, as all religious activities in Vietnam must be conducted according to law. Cuong noted that the PM's Instruction on Protestantism is very precise. The PPC is now working on a plan to implement the PM's Instruction to register Protestant groups in the province. "Our guiding principles are to facilitate religious beliefs according to law and to respect the fundamental rights of belief and non-belief in Vietnam," he said. There is no faith-based discrimination in Lao Cai province and citizens are allowed to follow or not follow religions so long as they respect the law. It is also important that religious believers respect and preserve traditional ethnic minority customs as well, he added.

19. (SBU) Poloff thanked the PPC for arranging the team's visit at such a busy time for the government, especially since Lao Cai had already received a visit from the Embassy in late February. He noted that during Ambassador Hanford's recent discussions with DPM Vu Khoan, Vice Minister of Public Security Nguyen Van Huong and CRA Chairman Ngo Yen Thi, the GVN acknowledged that the Northwest Highlands and northern Vietnam remain the most problematic areas of the country in terms of religious freedom, particularly with regard to Protestants. The importance of this issue for our bilateral relationship cannot be overstated, and the GVN has made registration of Protestant groups a clear domestic policy priority in the region over the next six months before the President's visit in November. Lao Cai's openness to frank discussion of its failure to register Protestants to date is an important step forward as is the PPC's willingness to allow the team to visit Protestant communities in the countryside. Poloff also noted with pleasure that the PPC is developing a plan to quickly implement the PM's Instruction on Protestantism and urged

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the Vice Chairman to share this plan with the Embassy as soon as it has been finalized.

10. (SBU) Cuong concluded the meeting by reading prepared talking points. He stated that Lao Cai attaches importance to religious freedom per the Joint Statement signed by President Bush and PM Khai in Washington last June. The PPC hopes that the U.S. Embassy will facilitate investment in the province, especially in the area of infrastructure, as transportation remains a significant problem. In addition, the province would like assistance to help re-habilitate victims of Agent Orange (AO) and other problems left over from the war. Finally, Cuong requested that the Embassy team write an objective report on religious freedom in Vietnam and Lao Cai so that Vietnam will be removed from the list of Country's of Particular Concern (CPC) this year.

Bat Xat District

11. (SBU) Following this meeting, Luong Ngoc Cap, Deputy Director of the Provincial Ethnic Affairs Committee (PEAC), took the team to Bat Xat District People's Committee (DPC)

headquarters, a 30-minute drive by improved roads from Lao Cai City. (Note: Mobile phone coverage ended on the outskirts of the city and was not detected anywhere else in the province, except at the very top of mountain passes. End Note.) District Chairman Ly Seo Din stated that over the last couple of years, the GVN has paid a lot of attention to religious and ethnic issues, especially at the provincial level. In Bat Xat, programs 135 and 120 (resettlement of people living in mountainous areas prone to landslides) have been particularly helpful. Living conditions have improved. There has also been significant progress in agriculture and education, he added.

¶12. (SBU) Turning to religion and ethnic issues, Din stated that the DPC always obeys GVN laws and regulations to respect the basic rights of ethnic minority peoples. Thus, Bat Xat District authorities have fully implemented GVN laws on religion. The DPC never forbid Protestant households from practicing their beliefs at any time. On the contrary, the DPC has been trying to disseminate guidelines on the new laws on religion to all cadres and citizens and to ensure that Protestants share equally in the district's economic development. Din would not estimate the total number of Protestants in the district because such statistics are hard to get, especially since many citizens are no longer Protestants, having decided to return to traditional beliefs.

¶13. (SBU) Poloff noted that many ECVN groups in the north have run into official stonewalling when they've applied to register. As an example, he showed Din and Deputy Director Cap a copy of the returned letter and envelopes from the Quan Binh District ECVN congregation's application that Pastor Vinh provided on April 5 (Ref A, Para 2). He asked how many Protestant congregations in the district have applied to register with the local CRA. At Cap's prompting, Din acknowledged that two communes in the district have active congregations, but claimed that no applications have been submitted by them to date. The district is waiting for formal guidance from the province before it will consider such applications, he added.

¶14. (SBU) Poloff further noted that a recent report from an influential international rights group (Freedom House's Center for Religious Freedom) alleged that in mid-March 2006, a H'mong Christian named Giang A Thenh of Vi Lau Hamlet in Bat Xat informed the ECVN that from January 31 officials and border guards ordered him to recant his faith and physically threatened him. The report also alleged that after Thenh resisted several orders to deny his faith his was driven from his home and land. Din stated that the DPC received a letter directly from the ECVN containing these allegations. Bat Xat officials immediately investigated this report on receipt of the letter, but found no evidence to support the allegations. While Din was unable to personally interview Thenh because of a scheduling conflict, officials did meet with Thenh's family who stated unequivocally that although some officials visited their home on March 31 to discuss Protestantism, nobody asked Thenh to renounce his faith in that meeting. The DPC also ascertained that an alleged March 4 visit by the local commune chairman to the Thenh home never occurred because "nothing was on the chairman's agenda for March 4", Din asserted.

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¶15. (SBU) Din further stated that the two officials who investigated the Thenh case discovered that the original letter sent to the ECVN was not drafted by Thenh as he cannot write. The DPC believes that the writer exaggerated the details of the case. For example, the letter claimed that local officials had prevented Thenh from building a house, but, in fact, the house was already completed when investigating officials visited Thenh. The officials also ascertained that allegations that Ministry of Public

Security (MPS) or Border Protection Force (BPF) personnel visited Thenh in March were untrue, although an agricultural seminar was conducted in his village during that period. Thenh himself reportedly assessed the letter as "beyond the spirit" of his complaint. Din concluded somewhat wistfully by saying that Thenh's case was against GVN laws on whistle blowing; Thenh should have gone to local officials with his complaints first.

Sang Ma Sao Commune

¶16. (SBU) Following the district-level meeting in Bat Xat, Cap and Din took the Embassy team to the People's Committee headquarters in San Ma Sao Commune. The trip from the district center to the remote base camp facility lasted two hours over winding and switchbacked mountain roads that passed over two separate ranges. Upon arrival, two ethnic H'mong commune representatives (NFI) greeted and briefed the team on the social conditions of the region. Sang Ma Sao Commune comprises 7,000 hectares of mountainous land containing eight villages with a total of 541 households, or 3,500 people. The average household has 5-6 members and farms 3,000 square meters of dryfield rice during the single growing season. In addition to the committee headquarters and a police station, the base camp also includes a six-room school house that teaches students up to the ninth grade. A few students go on to attend the district-level boarding school. The furthest that the average villager will ever travel is down the mountain to the Mung Hung market center, 14 kilometers from the commune. There is only one group of Protestants living in Sang Ma Sao. They are ethnic H'mong and practice their religion at home, the commune officials said.

Sang Ma Sao Village

¶17. (SBU) It transpired that the actual village the ECVN recommended the Embassy team visit was at the top of the mountain and could only be reached by foot along a steep, ten-kilometer trail. It was evident that the commune, district and provincial officials did not expect the team to be willing to hike to the village. However, when Poloff made clear his intention of meeting with Protestants in the commune whatever the burden, they reluctantly agreed to accompany the team to Sang Ma Sao village. The trail to the village took three hours to hike through bamboo groves mixed with higher elevation evergreen trees. The team passed only two or three villagers during the ascent, but many more were visible working in the occasional terraced clearings or tending buffaloes in the breaks above or below the trail. A number of primitive water wheels and irrigation systems constructed of bamboo were built near the path close to several small settlements. Din noted that these were constructed under Program 135.

¶18. (SBU) By the end of the hike, most of the attending officials and plain clothes policemen were overcome by heat and had stripped to their undershirts. They were also far less talkative than during the initial ascent. Nevertheless, after a brief visit to the village headman's smoke-filled hut for a cup of green tea and a shared pipe of some kind of tobacco-like herb, they cheerfully took the team to visit a nearby Protestant household. The hut was built of vertical wood slats and thatched with grass. The floor in the main room was bare rock with a pit fireplace full of hot coals in one corner and a naked baby asleep on a straw mat in another. Only the daughter-in-law and baby were home. Sung Ti Ma was visibly nervous and had to be coaxed into the main room of the hut. Through H'mong to Vietnamese to English interpretation, Ma said that her husband and the rest of her family of ten was out working to prepare their fields for the growing season. Eight members of the family are Protestant. They do not worship in the home, but she would not say where they conduct their services. Poloff asked if her family had been able to celebrate Easter this year, but Ma admitted that she does

not know what Easter actually is. At any rate, her family

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did not do anything special to celebrate the holiday. Poloff asked which denomination the Sung family follows. Ma said that a member of their community had traveled to Hanoi to learn about Protestantism and they all follow him, but she stated that she is not really sure what Poloff was asking. "I'm just a daughter-in-law," she said. Ma stated that she is 18 years old, has two children after three years of marriage and, like the rest of her family, has never attended school. Her family owns two buffaloes and farms 3,600 square meters of land. She could not estimate their annual income.

¶19. (SBU) Poloff took the opportunity in front of the nine GVN observers to inform Ma that the United States and Vietnam have agreed that northern Protestants should be allowed to worship without harassment from local officials. He noted that the Embassy team will be returning to the region soon to check that conditions for Protestants in Sang Ma Sao continue to improve. According to the village headman, no other Protestants from the village were available at that time of day, so the team returned to the commune. The return journey was notable as many farmers were returning up the path to their homes. Some carried very large wooden plows on their shoulders and others were equally burdened.

Why are the H'mong Becoming Protestants?

¶20. (SBU) During the descent from San Ma Sao village, the provincial and district officials were in a much more open mood and gave Poloff a history of Protestantism in the region. According to Cap, H'mong villagers in the north first learned about evangelical Christianity through shortwave radio broadcasts originating in the Philippines in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Local officials did not notice H'mong Protestantism until 1993, by which time it had become a widespread phenomenon in the border region with China. However, initial practice of the faith was confused, as little was actually known by believers about its tenets. In the mid-1990s this led to a number of Protestants declaring faith in "Vang Chu," a new H'mong belief apparently originating in Laos that holds that the world was created by a single omniscient God. (Note: Veneration of Vang Chu is usually associated with militant H'mong separatism by GVN officials. In the past, provincial authorities, particularly in Lai Chau Province on the border with Laos, have reportedly accused Protestant H'mong of harboring an illegal political agenda because some believers equate Vang Chu with Jesus Christ. End Note.) In the late 1990s, the Vang Chu phenomenon subsided as Protestants learned more about their faith from ECVN and SECV missionaries. Still, Cap asserted that many Protestants remain ignorant of their faith and profess to follow Protestantism for economic and social reasons.

¶21. (SBU) According to Cap, traditional H'mong beliefs and customs require substantial sacrifices (at least one buffalo) on important occasions like weddings and funerals. If a family has more than just one of these events in a two or three year period, it could ruin the family by destroying their ability to farm the land, as buffaloes are the only economical source of pulling power in the region. Protestant H'mong, however, are not required to make any sacrifices or other economically negative activities. In addition, they are allowed to stop work early on Thursdays for prayers and are not required to work at all on Sundays. Keeping the Sabbath is thus considered a significant improvement in lifestyle. Finally, Cap noted that H'mong women are traditionally subservient to their husbands, but as Christians are considered equals, so many women are attracted to Protestant beliefs. Female believers thus generally outnumber males in remote villages, he added.

Thuy Dien Village

¶22. (SBU) On April 25, Cap took the Embassy team to another Protestant village in Ban Phiet Commune, Bao Thang District. The village is relatively near Lao Cai City but distant from district headquarters. It lies on a peninsula between a dammed, Vietnam-side tributary and the main river that comprises the border with China in this region. Cap noted on the three kilometer walk to the village that H'mong are the majority on both sides of the border and many Vietnamese H'mong have relatives on the China-side of the river. The path to the village crosses over the reservoir of a tiny and now disused hydroelectric station that was considered a

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major achievement for North Vietnam when it was built in ¶1961. Today, the dam's reservoir makes possible paddy-rice farming techniques in the area. The path winds its way through cinnamon tree groves and is notable for several ethnic Dzao mound graves with Dzao and Chinese language inscriptions on their ceremonial stone offering porticos. Recent offerings included fruit and bottles of moonshine rice alcohol. Cap stated that in this area Dzao and H'mong and several other ethnic groups live in mixed communities.

¶23. (SBU) Ban Phiet itself is a village of 36 woven bamboo huts with corrugated asbestos roofs. The team was taken to a cluster of three houses in one corner. Communal officials introduced Thao Thi Tau, a woman of about forty dressed in a colorful ethnic costume and bright pink headscarf over her bald head, and her neighbor Lo Thi Ho, a younger woman in similar attire. A young man named Lo The and an older man named Tsung Seo quickly joined the delegation in Tau's hut. The hut was sparsely furnished but was electrified. A Russian-made short wave radio hung from one of the central poles. A Christian poster calendar was the only ornament hanging on the walls. Incomplete Christian symbols were carved into the surface of the hut's only table. Tau's two-year old son sported a Spiderman t-shirt, but no pants.

¶24. (SBU) The (pronounced TAY) stated that most villagers in Ban Phiet are Protestant. The husband of Tau was unavailable to speak that day because he was out hunting snakes, however as a long-time Christian, he was happy to discuss Protestantism with Poloff. He said that life is difficult as the villagers do not have enough land to cultivate, though their houses are all new. In fact, the village itself is only ten years old. It was built when a group of H'mong from a village in Bac Ha decided to move because the land there was too poor. Their new commune provided land for the new village and gave the immigrants roofing materials, but villagers collected cinnamon wood and bamboo to build the frames for their new houses themselves. Since the village moved, Ban Phiet's inhabitants have given up traditional slash and burn techniques in favor of fixed cultivation agriculture. They raise rice, maize and manioc for their subsistence, and sell chickens at the commune's nearby market to raise cash, he said.

¶25. (SBU) This is the only one of the four Protestants the team met in Ban Phiet who ever attended school, having completed first grade. He has also been to Hanoi one time. The others have never traveled outside of Lao Cai and cannot afford to travel to visit their relatives in China. He speaks Vietnamese well, and the older man and younger girl can speak some. Tau apparently understands some Vietnamese but cannot speak the language at all. Poloff asked what denomination the four follow. He said that they "follow Hanoi," i.e., the ECVN. The State only allows them to practice their beliefs at home. Poloff asked him what Protestantism means to him. He said that Protestantism is the word of God. God speaks only good things and instructs humans not to do bad things. After further prodding he said that Protestants follow Jesus Christ. Jesus means "good

news." The said that he has seen pictures of Christ, but he admitted that he does not know who he is. "We only follow his teachings," he said. The H'mong Protestants still preserve their customs by wearing traditional clothes, but they no longer engage in ceremonies to sacrifice buffaloes, he added.

¶26. (SBU) Poloff pointed to the calendar's image of a beatific woman in a flowing dress holding on to a stone cross amid a raging sea with the light of God shining down and asked The to explain what it means to him. He said that the cross is a symbol of blessing and of protection that the H'mong like to wear if they can afford them as a good luck charm and to identify themselves to each other. Other than that, he admitted he does not know what the cross symbolizes, nor what the calendar image depicts. Seo, Tau and Ho said that they do not know anything more about Protestantism than The, though one man from the community recently traveled to Hanoi to get religious materials from the ECVN, including some H'mong language bibles to help instruct the villagers in Christianity. In front of the 15 official observers, Poloff informed the group that the United States and Vietnam have agreed that northern Protestants should be allowed to worship without harassment from local officials. He encouraged them to register their group with local authorities as soon as possible and noted that the Embassy team will be returning to the region soon to check that conditions for Protestants in Ban Phiet continue to improve.

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Bao Thang District

¶27. (SBU) Following the visit to Ban Phiet, Cap took the team to Bao Thang District headquarters, an hour's drive on good roads from the village. The road passes through Phong Hai Town (incorrectly identified as Phung Hai District in Ref A, Para 11), which is a Kinh township founded as a new economic zone by the GVN in the late 1960s for forced immigrants from Haiphong City. It is now one of the major areas of habitation in the district, having displaced several ethnic minority communities. At the headquarters in Bao Thang Town, DPC Deputy Chairman Le Cong Minh noted that the district comprises 67,000 hectares and 100,000 people from seventeen ethnic groups. Some 70 percent of the population is ethnic Kinh. The second largest group is the H'mong, with six percent. There are 15 townships and communes. GDP growth is stable at 14 percent a year, with annual per capita income estimated at ten million VND (USD 630). In the past few years, living conditions have improved, as has access to education for all children, which has resulted in a large number of economic immigrants. These are also mostly ethnic Kinh, but include some ethnic Muong from Thanh Hoa Province south of Hanoi. Most of the H'mong are also not indigenous to the district, having moved to Bao Thang from Bac Ha District over the last several decades. The DPC has recently been focusing on improving the infrastructure of the rural parts of the district and has achieved some success. Six communes used to be on Lao Cai's list of extremely poor communes, but now only one remains on the list, Minh noted.

¶28. (SBU) Poloff thanked Minh for the opportunity to visit Ban Phiet Village and to interview Protestant residents. He reiterated the importance of registering Protestants in the district per GVN policy for the bilateral relationship. Poloff also noted that the Protestants in Ban Phiet stated they had access to H'mong language bibles, but Bao Thang was recently alleged to have fined two ECVN house church deacons who traveled to Hanoi to acquire application forms to register their congregation on the charge of possession of illegal H'mong language bibles (Ref A, Para 11). Minh responded that the individuals were fined for possessing illegal materials, but not because they possessed H'mong

language bibles per se. Religious documents in general must be published by the CRA and all believers, regardless of faith, must seek permission to use "foreign language bibles." These H'mong language bibles were written in the Phillipines so they do not use proper H'mong language. Poloff noted that some H'mong language bibles are apparently produced in Hanoi and Cap admitted that the books in question were probably not imported to Vietnam. Nevertheless, provincial officials, much less district officials, do not have the authority to decide without GVN guidance if such texts are legal, and the CRA has not provided any guidance on the matter, he said.

129. (SBU) Cap stated that Lao Cai province plans to include a report on the problem to the national CRA as part of their implementation plan on the PM's Instruction. In any case, the deacons in question were "administratively punished" according to the GVN's laws on publication. Poloff noted that the ECVN alleges the deacons were held for sixteen days. Minh admitted that the DPC did call them in to talk about publication laws and to the use of illegal cultural items, but denied that the two were held in custody for any period of time. Cap reiterated that it is unfair to say that the two were fined because they possessed bibles, but rather because they possessed illegal publications. He asked that Embassy team objectively explain this to "outside people." If the GVN now allows groups to possess H'mong language materials, "we will allow them to circulate such materials per our implementation plan," he added.

Comment

130. (SBU) This was an unprecedented visit. The Embassy team was able to discuss several serious allegations made against Lao Cai provincial and district-level authorities. Access to a small sample of blocal Protestants and the frank and open discussion with officials at all levels about the gap between the new framework on religion and its implementation were a significant improvement over previous outreach trips. It is clear from the reception of the visit at such a sensitive political time and from the repetition of talking points in Lao Cai and Ha Giang (Ha Giang trip reported

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septel) that the GVN gave strict instructions to northern provinces to change their approach to our concerns on religious freedom. While the situation for Protestants has not yet markedly improved, it may now be possible for house church congregations to register their activities per the law and per Lao Cai's purported plans. We plan to send another team to the region as early as June to follow up on these developments. End Comment.

MARINE